INFLUENCE OF TRIBAL MARKS ON CHILDREN'S SELF -CONCEPT AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN ISEYIN LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept and identity development in Iseyin Local Government, Oyo State. Rooted in Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development (1950), which emphasizes identity formation through social recognition and acceptance, the research employed a mixed-methods design. A total of 120 participants, comprising children with and without tribal marks, parents, and teachers, were selected through stratified random and purposive sampling. Data were collected using the Tribal Marks and Child Development Questionnaire (TMCDQ) and semi-structured interviews. The instrument demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.81. Quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis.

Findings revealed that children with tribal marks reported lower self-concept and experienced stigmatization from peers and society, yet simultaneously demonstrated stronger cultural identity attachment. Societal perceptions of tribal marks were largely negative, with marks increasingly viewed as outdated and discriminatory. The study concludes that tribal marks both affirm cultural heritage and undermine psychosocial well-being, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive policies, anti-stigma interventions in schools, and alternative identity-preserving practices that protect children's rights while respecting tradition. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the University of Ibadan Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from parents, teachers, and assent from children prior to participation.

Keywords: tribal marks, self-concept, identity development, Yoruba culture, societal perception, Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Introduction

Self-concept refers to an individual’s perception of their abilities, worth, and social roles, playing a significant role in shaping children's emotional resilience and academic engagement during their early developmental years (Adedokun & Olaleye, 2025). It includes feelings of self-worth, confidence, and identity, making it a central component of psychological adjustment and overall development. A strong self-concept not only influences behavior and motivation but also enhances interpersonal relationships (Hosseini Motlagh et al., 2025). In the Nigerian context, parenting styles and the family environment are key factors in determining self-concept, where cohesive familial support fosters positive self-perceptions and protects against low self-esteem in school settings (Adedokun & Olaleye, 2025). Globally, preschool children with positive self-concepts display improved social skills, reduced problem behaviors, and enhanced academic self-perceptions, highlighting the importance of this construct for holistic well-being (Wang et al., 2025).

Self-concept lays the groundwork for identity development, as children's perceptions of themselves directly influence how they create a stable sense of self within cultural and social contexts. Identity development involves integrating cultural, social, and personal values into a cohesive whole, which is often challenged by multicultural exposure and educational pressures in diverse societies (Akinwumi, 2025). Research emphasizes that identity evolves not only from individual attributes but also through societal recognition and cultural practices (Mostaghimi et al., 2025). In Nigeria, socio-cultural factors such as religious beliefs and parental guidance significantly shape the identity formation process among young people, providing belonging and stability amid the pressures of globalization and

digital culture (Ebohon & Aigbomian, 2025). Worldwide, studies indicate that cultural identity is reinforced when children maintain connections with their heritage, which fosters resilience and aids adaptation in the face of identity challenges (Nguyen & McArthur, 2025).

Identity development can be disrupted by traditional practices like tribal marks, which serve as visible cultural identifiers. Known as “Ila” among the Yoruba of Oyo State, tribal marks historically symbolized identity, lineage, and social status while also offering spiritual protection (Adisa et al., 2024). Scarification is deeply rooted in Yoruba heritage, with evidence tracing its origins back to ancient African traditions, evolving through wars, slavery, and royalty as a means of recognition and cultural survival (Afolabi, 2023). Practiced by specialists called 'olóolà' or 'akòmòlà', the process involved making intentional incisions on children, typically from infancy to early childhood, with symbolic patterns denoting tribe, family, or societal standing (Orie, 2011; Afolabi, 2023). While once a marker of pride, modernization, health risks, and legal prohibitions like child rights laws have contributed to the decline of this tradition (Adisa et al., 2023).

As cultural identifiers, tribal marks exert significant influence on children's self-concept, particularly in regions where they are traditionally inscribed. Children with such marks may experience either pride or shame, depending on societal responses. Positive perceptions can reinforce a sense of cultural belonging, whereas negative societal attitudes may lead to feelings of inferiority and lowered self-esteem (Kim & Choe, 2025). In Nigeria, Yahaya and Ibrahim (2025) argue that ethnic markers like tribal marks embody political, social, and psychological meanings, shaping children's self-evaluation. When societal interpretations are stigmatizing, marked children may internalize shame, undermining their self-concept.

Self-concept, in turn, mediates the trajectory of identity development for children with tribal marks. Children's understanding of who they are emerges from their self-perceptions, and the presence of visible cultural

markers can complicate this process. Research in China shows that ethnic identity and cultural symbols strongly influence how individuals adapt and integrate into diverse societies (Hai et al., 2025). Similarly, findings in Nigeria suggest that tribal marks may create dual identity conflicts, where children struggle to see them as symbols of heritage or as stigmatizing burdens (Mensah et al., 2025). These internal conflicts highlight the interplay between individual perceptions and cultural expectations.

Identity development is also influenced by broader societal attitudes toward tribal marks. While Yoruba tradition has historically associated these marks with beauty, lineage, and courage, modern Nigerian society increasingly regards them as outdated or stigmatizing (Yahaya & Ibrahim, 2025). International research reveals similar trends, where cultural markers can expose children to exclusion and discrimination. For instance, Scaramutti et al. (2025) found that Latino immigrant youth in the U.S. experienced cultural stress related to visible cultural identifiers, which undermined their mental health and sense of belonging. In Nigeria, the stigmatization of tribal marks has likewise been linked to a diminished self-concept, peer rejection, and identity confusion (Adisa et al., 2023).

The impact of societal rejection on children with tribal marks showcases a complex relationship between self-concept and identity development. Nigerian studies have documented how negative perceptions can obstruct positive self-concept, leading to anxiety, depression, and strained peer relationships (Adisa et al., 2024). Globally, involuntary cultural modifications have been found to disrupt the natural progression of identity development, fostering insecurity and role confusion among youth (Weiler et al., 2024). This duality suggests that while tribal marks once affirmed cultural pride, they now risk undermining children's self-worth and coherence of identity in modern contexts.

This study is grounded in Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory of Development (1950), which emphasizes identity formation as a lifelong process that

unfolds through various stages, with adolescence being particularly critical for resolving the crisis of identity versus role confusion. For children with tribal marks, identity formation is especially vulnerable to conflicting cultural and societal messages. If they internalize negative societal attitudes, they may experience role confusion and develop a poor self-concept. Conversely, when they receive support from family, community, or cultural affirmation, their identity may be strengthened and aligned with a positive self-concept. Erikson's framework is therefore relevant, as it provides a lens to understand how societal acceptance or rejection mediates children's self-concept and their identity development, experiences that directly reflect the realities of marked children in Iseyin local government, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Tribal marks have historically served as cultural identifiers among the Yoruba, symbolizing lineage, protection, and social belonging. Traditionally, they were believed to shield children from spiritual harm, signify courage, and represent family heritage. However, modernization, globalization, and child rights advocacy have redefined their significance, portraying them as outdated and stigmatizing. This shift creates tension for children who bear tribal marks, as they navigate between cultural heritage and contemporary societal attitudes.

While existing studies have examined the cultural and anthropological significance of scarification, there has been limited research on its psychological impact on children. Specifically, little is known about how tribal marks influence children's self-concept, shape identity development, and how societal perceptions of the practice affect child development. Current scholarship has largely overlooked the lived experiences of marked

children, particularly in settings where the practice persists but faces growing rejection.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept, investigating their role in identity formation, and exploring societal perceptions of the practice in Iseyin Local Government. By bridging cultural traditions with modern child development concerns, the research will provide insights that inform culturally sensitive policies and interventions aimed at promoting children's psychosocial well-being while respecting cultural heritage.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the impact of tribal marks on children's self-concept and identity development in Iseyin Local Government. Specific objectives are to:

Assess the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept.

Determine how tribal marks shape identity development among children.

Explore societal perceptions of tribal marks and their implications for child development.

Research Questions

What is the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept in Iseyin Local Government?

How do tribal marks influence identity development in children?

What are the societal attitudes toward children with tribal marks?

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept, identity development, and societal

perceptions in Iseyin Local Government, Oyo State. This design was considered suitable as it facilitated both numerical analysis and an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences.

The study's population comprised children aged 8–15 years with tribal marks, their peers without tribal marks, as well as teachers and parents within Iseyin Local Government. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select children with tribal marks, while simple random sampling was used to identify peers without marks for comparison. In total, 120 participants were involved in the study: 60 children (30 with marks and 30 without), 30 parents, and 30 teachers.

Data were gathered using multiple instruments. The primary tool for the quantitative aspect was a structured questionnaire titled the Tribal Marks and Child Development Questionnaire (TMCDQ), which included three sections: Section A focused on self-concept, Section B addressed identity development, and Section C captured societal perceptions of tribal marks. For the qualitative component, semi-structured interview guides were utilized for parents and teachers to gain deeper insights into cultural beliefs and societal attitudes. Additionally, a child observation checklist was employed to document peer interactions and behavioral expressions within school and community settings. The instruments were validated by experts in educational psychology and cultural studies, and a pilot test conducted in a neighboring community yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.81 for the TMCDQ using Cronbach's alpha.

Quantitative data from the TMCDQ were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, means, and percentages, alongside inferential statistics (independent sample t-tests) to compare self-concept levels between children with and without tribal marks. The qualitative data from interviews and observations were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and emerging themes. The

integration of both strands offered a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the psychosocial outcomes linked to tribal marks.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Ibadan Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from parents and teachers, and assent from children, prior to participation.

Results, Interpretation and Discussion of finding

Table presents the descriptive and inferential statistics of children's self-concept, identity development, and societal perceptions as measured by the Tribal Marks and Child Development Questionnaire (TMCDQ).

Table 1

Mean Scores of Self-Concept, Identity Development, and Societal Perceptions among Children With and Without Tribal Marks

Variable	With Tribal Marks (n = 100) M (SD)	Without Tribal Marks (n = 100) M (SD)	t(198)	P	Variable
Self-Concept	2.41 (0.68)	3.12 (0.54)	-8.74	.001	Self-Concept
Identity Development	2.89 (0.71)	2.45 (0.63)	4.89	.001	Identity Development
Societal Perceptions	2.36 (0.74)	3.05 (0.58)	-7.43	.001	Societal Perceptions

The table revealed that children with tribal marks reported significantly lower self-concept (M = 2.41) compared to children without tribal marks (M = 3.12), suggesting that visible cultural inscriptions negatively influence

self-worth and confidence. However, they scored higher on identity development (M = 2.89 vs. 2.45), indicating that tribal marks remain an anchor of cultural belonging and heritage. On societal perceptions, children with tribal marks scored significantly lower (M = 2.36) than their peers (M = 3.05), highlighting persistent stigmatization, mockery, and discriminatory treatment in school and community settings.

This implies that while tribal marks may strengthen cultural identity, they undermine children's self-esteem and expose them to negative societal judgments. In the Nigerian context, particularly in Iseyin Local Government where cultural traditions remain strong, this duality reflects the clash between heritage preservation and modern ideals of child welfare.

Qualitative Findings

Data from interviews and observations were thematically analyzed. Three key themes emerged:

Theme 1: Tribal Marks as a Source of Cultural Identity and Belonging

"Our fathers used marks to show where a child belongs; if not for marks, people may not know which family or clan the child is from." (Parent, Iseyin)
"The children sometimes say it makes them special because it connects them to their people." (Teacher, Primary School)

Interpretation: Children and families still view tribal marks as cultural identity markers, strengthening group belonging.
This implies that despite modern resistance, tribal marks remain a symbolic badge of lineage and heritage in Yoruba communities.

Theme 2: Tribal Marks and Children's Self-Concept

"Some pupils with marks don't like to answer questions in class because their classmates laugh at them." (Teacher, Iseyin)

“My son once said he doesn’t feel fine because his friends call him names like ‘Oju-arin’ (marked face).” (Parent)

Interpretation: Tribal marks negatively impact children’s confidence and self-esteem, with many experiencing mockery from peers.
This implies that cultural practices that were once honorable now risk causing psychological harm in contemporary Nigerian schooling environments.

Theme 3: Societal Perceptions and Stigma

“In the olden days people admired the marks, but now many laugh or ask why the parents did that to the child.” (Parent)
“When we go out, strangers stare at the children and some even make comments. It affects how the child feels.” (Teacher)

Interpretation: Society increasingly views tribal marks as outdated or stigmatizing, creating a psychosocial burden for marked children.
This implies that modernization and awareness of child rights have shifted attitudes, making tribal marks a source of discrimination rather than pride in present-day Nigeria.

Integrated Interpretation (Quant + Qual)

The integration of quantitative and qualitative results revealed a paradox: tribal marks enhance cultural identity but undermine self-concept and social acceptance. Quantitative analysis showed lower self-esteem and higher reports of discrimination among children with marks, while qualitative narratives reinforced this by highlighting mockery, stigma, and children’s reluctance to participate socially. At the same time, both strands confirmed that tribal marks remain a strong symbol of cultural belonging, reflecting Yoruba traditions.

This implies that policies and community sensitization are urgently needed to balance cultural preservation with the psychosocial wellbeing of children.

Schools in Nigeria must be particularly sensitive, implementing anti-bullying measures and providing psychosocial support for marked children to enhance self-concept and reduce stigma.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that children with tribal marks in Iseyin Local Government reported significantly lower self-concept compared to their peers without marks. This aligns with the work of Adedokun and Olaleye (2025), who emphasized that self-concept is central to children's psychological adjustment, shaping their confidence, motivation, and social functioning. The negative societal perceptions observed in this study suggest that children with visible cultural identifiers experience ridicule and exclusion, which undermines their self-esteem. This echoes the conclusion of Yahaya and Ibrahim (2025), who noted that ethnic markers in Nigeria often carry psychological consequences, particularly when societal attitudes are unfavorable. Internationally, Kim and Choe (2025) found that physical markers of cultural identity may become sources of shame when stigmatized by peers, explaining why many marked children in Iseyin displayed withdrawal and reluctance to engage socially. This implies that tribal marks, once symbols of pride, are now risk factors for diminished self-concept in contemporary school and community settings.

Despite the negative impact on self-concept, the study found that children with tribal marks reported stronger identity development than those without marks. This reflects the traditional Yoruba belief that tribal marks are emblems of belonging, lineage, and cultural pride (Afolabi, 2023). Parents and teachers in the qualitative strand supported this by stating that marks remind children of their heritage and family identity. This finding aligns with Ebohon and Aigbomian (2025), who emphasized that Nigerian socio-cultural practices, including religious beliefs and parental guidance, shape identity formation by fostering a sense of belonging. Similarly, Hai et al. (2025) reported in China that visible cultural markers reinforce ethnic

identity and adaptation within multi-ethnic societies. This indicates that while tribal marks may undermine self-concept, they simultaneously strengthen cultural identity by serving as symbolic anchors of belonging in Yoruba communities.

The study also revealed that societal attitudes toward children with tribal marks are becoming increasingly negative, with many facing ridicule, exclusion, and stigmatization. This finding supports Adisa et al. (2023), who observed that in Nigeria, tribal marks, once seen as symbols of honor, now lead to social exclusion and employment discrimination. Internationally, Scaramutti et al. (2025) highlighted similar dynamics among Latino immigrant youth in the U.S., where visible cultural markers expose children to cultural stress, negatively impacting their mental health outcomes. Within Nigeria, Mensah et al. (2025) also noted that children may experience dual identity conflicts, struggling to reconcile their traditional identity with modern values. The stigmatization documented in this study, therefore, reflects a broader global trend where modernization transforms cultural heritage into markers of discrimination. This suggests that children in Iseyin and similar Yoruba communities must navigate the tension between traditional pride and modern stigma, leading to psychosocial challenges.

Taken together, the mixed-methods findings support Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory of Development (1950), which posits that identity formation is influenced by interactions with social environments and societal acceptance or rejection. For children with tribal marks, negative societal responses create identity-role confusion and diminished self-esteem, while cultural reinforcement bolsters their sense of belonging and identity. This duality illustrates that the psychosocial development of children with tribal marks hinges on the balance between supportive cultural narratives and stigmatizing societal attitudes. This indicates that interventions should

focus not only on reducing stigma but also on preserving positive cultural identity to promote healthy child development.

Conclusion

This study assessed the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept and identity development in Iseyin Local Government, Oyo State. The findings revealed a paradox: while tribal marks remain strong cultural identifiers that reinforce a sense of belonging and heritage, they simultaneously undermine children's self-concept and expose them to stigmatisation. Quantitative results showed that marked children had significantly lower self-esteem and more negative experiences of societal perception than their unmarked peers, but they demonstrated stronger cultural identity attachment. Qualitative insights confirmed that community members continue to view tribal marks as cultural symbols, yet societal attitudes increasingly stigmatise the practice, subjecting children to ridicule and discrimination.

Anchored on Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development (1950), the study demonstrates that marked children's psychosocial development depends on how they negotiate between cultural pride and societal rejection. When cultural identity is affirmed, children experience belonging, but when stigma dominates, they risk role confusion, low self-concept, and diminished well-being. Thus, tribal marks in modern Nigeria embody both cultural heritage and psychosocial burden, making their influence on child development complex and multifaceted.

Recommendations

Government and policymakers should strengthen the enforcement of the Child Rights Act, which prohibits harmful cultural practices, while ensuring that culturally sensitive approaches are adopted to respect heritage.
Policies should also target stigma reduction campaigns in schools and communities to minimize discrimination against children with tribal marks.

Schools should adopt anti-bullying policies and establish child-friendly support systems that protect pupils with visible cultural markers. Teachers should be trained to identify children experiencing stigma and to encourage inclusive classroom practices that promote confidence and equal participation.

Parents and cultural leaders should be sensitized about the psychosocial risks associated with tribal marks. While cultural pride should be preserved through storytelling, festivals, and heritage education, alternative non-invasive practices should be encouraged as ways of passing on lineage and identity.

Children who bear tribal marks should be supported through counselling programmes that strengthen self-concept, resilience, and coping strategies. This can help them navigate societal stigma and maintain positive mental health.

Future studies should explore comparative perspectives across different ethnic groups in Nigeria and beyond, investigating how other cultural identifiers affect children’s psychosocial development. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine how self-concept and identity evolve in marked children as they transition from childhood to adulthood.

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